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A Zine on Art and Design

#01

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Edited by Syed Hamza-Salar Hassan
Front Cover by Maheen Zahid / Pyroshi

Introduction

During the Summer of 2024, I was looking for a book. It's titled *Mazaar Bazaar: Design and Visual Culture in Pakistan.* Its collection of essays cover topics ranging from the visual identity of brands like *Rooh Afzah* to *Pehelwan* (Wrestler) posters, all collected in a size-able tome. It's been long out of print and is unavailable in stores. Luckily, a copy managed to surface from the library at Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS). With it finally in my hands, I wondered, "has anyone written anything similar since"?

The book came out in 2009, far removed from today's cultural, online landscape. It made me realize there was a lack of up-to-date writing about Pakistani design and visual culture, or at least a lack of means through which the conversation around it can stay current.

This is where Aks comes in.

With this inaugural edition of the zine, I hope it gives readers a sense of what this publication aims to be; a resource that engages community, encourages conversation and fosters a deeper look into what has happened, is happening and may happen in terms of Pakistan's visual culture.

Syed Hamza-Salar Hassan
Editor, Aks Zine

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Smiles and Swipes: An Interview with Arafat Mazhar

The director and producer reflects on the impact of his recent animated work, societal fears and how religion amplifies them

Your short films Shehr-e-tabassum and Swipe were well received in the University and screening circuit. What was the response from the general public beyond those social strata?

Swipe and *Shehr-e-tabassum*'s major metrics are either online comments and engagements or in public. The best and most significant response for me was the public universities in Punjab and Karachi where students from diverse ethnic and class backgrounds. Especially Karachi University's communication department; their engagement with it was very interesting. They got to discuss Balochistan, Bangladesh and blasphemy just based on looking at and engaging with those short films in a way that I've not done before.

What insights did you and your team gain from that response?

Our team learned that people really yearn to see themselves, their past and their own anxieties reflected sincerely in stories, that there's a huge emotional need for that in the community.

Accessibility is an important part of the work you and your team do, such as making videos available in multiple local languages. What other avenues of accessibility are you and your team exploring to get the word out?

Right now, the biggest accessibility part was making it free and available in local languages. What we also want to do is be able to go to other cities as well to not just air films in cinemas and big universities, but also go to smaller cities and their universities, especially in Balochistan and KP. So that's an avenue of accessibility in our mind. Eventually, the hope is that we can find our way into accessible streaming services. There are major audiences that are middle class urban students, because that is where our stories and backgrounds are mostly coming from. That would be extremely helpful.

How is your team leveraging the animation medium to engage with ideas surrounding civics in Pakistan?

Animation for us has always been a tool rather than an end goal, and what it allows us is to speak about extremely sensitive and controversial subjects without enraging people. So how do we create an abstraction of a problem or an anxiety? The community ends up looking at themselves through a bit of a distance, so they have a less defensive reaction to it compared to if it were a live action. Automatically, the moment you start drawing people—our people—in an animation film, it automatically lends itself to a particular kind of abstraction that reduces risk. Also, sometimes using metaphorical and fictional and speculative fiction in animation allows us to speak about things that are difficult to speak about and sometimes are more effective to speak about in these ways.

You've mentioned previously about physical and social violence as a product of unexpressed anxieties people have about change. How is our local media—television, film, advertising—reinforcing those anxieties?

From popular novels and social media channels reinforcing anxieties about the Ahmadi community to sexist and misogynistic drama tropes, popular culture is full of this idea that somehow, we are consistently a victim of an other that can always be found within ourselves. Instead of properly and structurally finding out our histories and looking at the way imperial and colonial forces are at play, often we find ourselves blaming each other as tools of oppression. Why is it that a human rights activist woman will look a certain way on a TV channel or a person dressed in a "culturally liberal" way will be evil and dark? At the end of the day, it's a patriarchal reinforcement in multiple dramas.

How would you describe today's local media landscape as a whole in Pakistan?

There are some wonderful new things happening in the media landscapes in streaming and like the recent film *The Glass Worker*. So I think the traditional media landscape is going to shift in a small time.

"Animation...allows us to speak about extremely sensitive and controversial subjects without enraging people"

You've previously mentioned in 2020 that spaces for projecting authentic and honest voices through film/animation in Pakistan are "shrinking". What has changed since then?

Since 2020, I think honest voices have remained the same. I don't see any radical change in more authentic voices coming through film and animation as yet. I think the same people are speaking, but I do feel that new ways of engagement have emerged. People are using social media to speak truth to power and student movements are coming up with ways to do so too, but I haven't seen that reflected as yet in film and animation. Now this, obviously, also emerges from self censorship as a result of the way the state has set up even stricter boundaries of what counts as anti state or anti religion.

In past interviews, you've mentioned the concept of "Cyber-Khilafat", of anxieties surrounding nationalism, surveillance, radical Islam and fascism in Pakistan. In what ways has that concept manifested itself in everyday life aesthetically?

The Cyber-Khilafat aesthetic today is very strange. There's a constant combination of science and religion. The first time I saw it, it was in a very supremacist sort of way; racializing the Ahmadiyya community and using scientific examples and on how they are inferior. You can also see that in the recent story about false blasphemy accusations through cyber crime, about how people are using the Internet and internet technologies to entrap one another. Looking around, things are becoming more and more hetero-normative. There is a particular Islamic Republic of Pakistan aesthetic; the particular green and kind of symbol of piety that is around us. I think it's also there in digital platforms as well, such as these Sunni supremacist platforms. Cyber-Khilafat itself is a very speculative term right now. Aesthetically, I'm only imagining the way they might use artificial intelligence to create more things that might have its own Barevli aesthetic. Aesthetically, right now, it is not what I refer to in the term, which is the use of technology and religion; I don't think there's a clear aesthetic that's developed as such in technology plus radical Islam.

However, we have been seeing it emerge functionally a lot more through cyber crime units, the way blasphemy law is used as a surveillance tool, the way people are entrapping other people, pretending to be girls and sending blasphemous messages. Those things are becoming more and more present and prevalent.

What role do you see *Shehri*—and socially conscious Pakistani animation as a whole—in bringing about awareness and reform to society?

The role for Shehri is to just open the door and create a language, a vocabulary in local languages about civic and citizenship, which is something that's missing. I don't think we can change society as much as provide them with resources and educational tools to do the kind of *zehan sazi* and *terbia* and the kind of training that's required for the community to take action and be more active as citizens.

What are the current challenges or roadblocks that stand in the way of bringing about those reforms?

I think the biggest challenge and roadblocks in the way to reform is a lack of local initiatives that understand conceptually how to create a civic language, how to create a civic awareness that is both popular as well as indigenous. An idea of citizenship and civic rights that is rooted in local languages and appeals to the greater public is missing. The kind of intersectional class awareness that is required is a big challenge and the only thing we can do as a smaller platform is constantly try and research and come up with resources that can be used multiple times.

Arafat Mazhar is part of Puffball, a Lahore based animation and music studio. Watch *Shehr e Tabassum* and *Swipe* on Youtube

(Above)
Shehr e Tabassum
Video, 2020

(Below)
Swipe
Video, 2020

سوہنیا ظالما

Soniya/Zaalima: Coca-Cola and Pakistani Culture Commodified

Written by Syed Hamza-Salar Hassan

منتاں کر کر ہار گئ

پیاس نہی بجھدی میری

I feel so defeated begging to you

My thirst is not being quenched

These lyrics open playback singer Noor Jehan's song *Zaalima Coca-Cola Pila De* ("O Cruel One, Bring Me a Coca-Cola"), featured in the 1986 film *Chann Tay Soorma*. She plays a *tawaif*, a courtesan pleading to her onlooking patrons for a drink; a bottle of Coca-Cola. Everybody has one in hand, everyone except her. At every turn the johns—the so-called "darlings"—tease her with the promise to fulfill her wish, only to cruelly pull away at the last second. She ends her song empty-handed, the audience delighted as they pour their near-empty bottles onto the floor. It is a song about want and desire—be it for the pleasure of flesh or a stronger drink—and the helplessness that comes when someone else has power over it. In 2016, Noor Jehan's song found itself out of the *kotha* and in the studio, reappearing as a duet to promote Season 09 of Coke Studio, a music program sponsored by Coca-Cola featuring both established and fresh-faced artists from across Pakistan. In the ad, singer Umair Jaswal mistakenly places his bottle of Coke on a big red button that broadcasts their performance, its power bringing everyone within ear-shot into a cola-fueled ecstasy. Realizing his mistake, he removes the bottle and ends the broadcast as singer Meesha Shafi downs the rest of the Coke with a satisfied "Aah". Everyone is sated, not a single drop to spare.

Coca-Cola hasn't wasted a second reinforcing the idea of music with its product; the bottle that broadcasts music is as subtle as a sledgehammer. In pounding the idea home for 15 seasons over the past 17 years, the corporation has made "Coke" and "music" synonymous with one another in Pakistan. When Season 15 of Coke Studio was announced in 2024, Volkan Onguc, VP of Coca-Cola Pakistan and Afghanistan, stated "Coke Studio is etched into the country's musical DNA". What does it mean for a multinational corporation—and the people they put in charge—to have power in shaping a culturally fragmented state like Pakistan? Coke Studio showcases how corporate sponsorship in the arts is a larger systemic issue that manifests as cultural appropriation for profit and division between social classes. If left unchecked, it will continue to diminish the agency of Pakistan's artists and cultural institutions.

Even though Coke Studio started in 2007, the link between corporate sponsorship and music in Pakistan goes back to the 1980's. The erosion of traditional record labels and cultural institutions due to restrictive Islamic policies of the Zia era left a vacuum. Pepsi at the time had a monopoly on the soft drink market and saw this opening as a chance to use music to push its brand. The most notable sponsorship was with pop band Vital Signs, whose soaring popularity boosted the brand's image. "Pepsi played a huge role in Vital Signs' earlier years", says Ahmer Naqvi, a Pakistani music and cricket writer. "[They were] slapping its logo on T-shirts, album covers and even in their lyrics." Coke saw promise in its competitor's approach and collaborated with Sufi rock band Junoon on the anthem for the 1996 Cricket World Cup. This back and forth would evolve over the years, the multinationals becoming main benefactors as opposed to established cultural institutions. The music kept going and the soft drinks kept flowing.

In the late 90's, the traditional music industry continued to grow unstable. The introduction of cable TV made international content more widely available and local content restrictions limited avenues for Pakistani music to organically grow. When these restrictions were lifted in the early aughts, local television and radio networks began to thrive once more. Pepsi took advantage of this with their initial rendition of Battle of The Bands. Labels like AAG, Musik and Fire Records emerged to

promote new talent and address piracy. The decline, however, continued in 2007 due to national turmoil caused by the assassination of Benazir Bhutto and the Lal Masjid Siege. With the threat of terror attacks and an increased focus on live news broadcasting, the Pakistani music scene—and support for the arts in general—languished even further.

Much like the country at the time, Coke was also in a tough spot. Pepsi was still the market leader and showed no sign of slowing down; they needed to do something to make themselves relevant. Earlier that year, Coke saw success in Brazil with a one-off musical promotion titled "Coca-Cola Zero Studio". The corporation tapped Rohail Hyatt—member and producer of Vital Signs—to translate the promotion into a more robust production aimed at Pakistani audiences. The result was a filmed concert featuring established artists like Strings, Rahat Fateh Ali Khan and Ali Azmat performing music that fused Western Pop and local folk music. The program was a success, starting a run of seasons that continues to this day. Coke Studio brought music to people at a time when concerts weren't possible and the corporation a new lease on life in the market.

From articles in major newspapers to statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there's no shortage of voices stating how Coke Studio improved Pakistan's ailing image. A major factor to that is the resources it has access to. Being a multinational company, Coke can afford to spend a lot of money to saturate every mode of advertising to make itself seen and heard. They also used the internet to their advantage at the time, offering free downloads of their songs. There was even a period when promotional CD's were handed out at McDonald's. Cultural institutions, on the other hand, were underrepresented and underfunded as both corporate and government sponsor-ships began to dry out. Coke Studio, with the marketing infrastructure of its larger whole, replaced institutions when it came to the promotion of Pakistani music, going so far as to add the tagline "Sound of the Nation" from Season 7 onwards.

اک فرمئش نکی جئی پائ میں

تیری چپ دی سمجه نہ آئ

I made a small request

Your silence is beyond my comprehension

What does a nation's music sound like? Depending on who you ask in Pakistan, it may be the *qawallis* of Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, playback songs of Ahmad Rushdie or folk music of Dhol Faqeer. It's a question with no definitive answer, one that taps into a web of social, political, religious and economic contexts. It is an exercise Pakistanis engage in—implicitly and explicitly—everyday through their beliefs and actions. Those actions and beliefs are influenced by values that institutions have the power to set and reinforce. They're the ones who influence what is or what isn't Pakistani and, in most cases, are run by people from upper class backgrounds. "Working class people...have no access to this world", remarks Naqvi. "You need to be able to afford instruments [and] know people...there's a very high bar of entry". To encapsulate such a variety of music into a singular banner of "Pakistani music" would be to flatten those contexts and lose nuance. It ties in to a larger issue of Pakistan's inability to define itself in a way that isn't reductive.

To take a top-down approach, reducing the culture of Pakistan to simplified cultural markers, is to privilege a singular narrative. Instead of accepting pluralism inherent to the country, it boosts specific voices and points of view while silencing all else. Coke is no exception. For example, across its 13 seasons, the program has featured over 150 songs in Urdu and at least 130 in Punjabi. Songs featuring Sindhi, Balochi and Pashto languages don't go into double digits (6, 8 and 7 respectively). While the program has 6 Arabic songs and 11 in English so far, regional languages such as Awadhi, Kalaisha, Shina, Burushuski, Hindavi and Poorbi have only ever been featured once since the program's inception. A more accurate slogan for Coke Studio would be "Sound of Punjab". Like any other institution,

"Exposure, limited shows and endorsements can only go so far in sustaining artists and communities"

it controls what counts as Pakistani music, appealing to a specific demographic to create more customers and reinforce specific values, beliefs and representations about the country and its people.

Coke Studio, in order to maintain the effect of an authentic experience, initially used a filmed live studio format. Here featured musicians from various parts of Pakistan, accompanied by the house band, would perform. It is important to note that the studio is a constructed environment both in physical design and in the way performances in it are shot and edited together. The intimacy of the setting creates the impression of authenticity; you got what you saw and everyone stood on the same stage. As the seasons progressed, the production value of the program grew. The studio saw more expansion, elaborate lighting setups, giant screens and designer costumes. After Season 13's scaled down COVID setup, there was a shift away from the studio to a music video format. This shift posed another question, "what does the sound of Pakistan look like?", one that amplifies the skewed lens through which Coke Studio presents Pakistan. With the music video, the facade created by the program extends itself beyond the studio and into the world around us. The shift from the seemingly neutral stage to the visually loaded music video format results in pastiche, a Pakistan by way of fashion catalog.

There is an insidiousness to the cultural appropriation Coke Studio enables, one that gives the impression of showcasing diversity while only being skin deep. A notable example of this can be seen in the video for *Aayi Aayi*, the first release from Season 15. There are shots that feature *ralli*, a form of patchwork quilt-making exclusive to southern Pakistan, specifically the rural parts of Sindh, Balochistan and Rajasthan. Derived from the word *ralanna*—to mix or connect—these quilts are made of discarded pieces of cloth dyed and woven together in layers forming intricate patterns. They are made by village women and often have utility, used to make sacks and *charpoys* or given as wedding gifts. It is a form of communal bonding and expression, an archive of family histories and personal memories. With its roots to the ancient Indus Valley and the differences in quilting methods across tribes and regions, the *ralli* is an object with deep historical and traditional significance to the people who exercise the craft.

The inclusion of such a tradition, especially one considered from the fringes, toes the line between respectful acknowledgment and appropriation. According to the producers of Coke Studio, the inclusion of *ralli* indicates an effort to do justice to the culture they took inspiration from. They saw it as an opportunity to create something that "represents Sindhi culture" so that attention can "be paid to our Sindh". This is evidenced in how the song prominently features Sindhi performers and aesthetics. A lot of media in Pakistan is targeted towards its most dense urban populations in Punjab and Karachi, leaving less space for underrepresented parts of the country. The promotion surrounding *Aayi Aayi* may have created that space, bringing awareness to *ralli* and other cultural traditions in the region to a wider audience. If that is the case, then the attempt at doing so is undercut by its execution. The aforementioned *ralli* in the video for *Aayi Aayi* sport Coke Studio's branding. Putting a logo on something is nothing new; what feels particularly off here is how the brand attaches itself to this specific object, using it to say what they want to say. It is an attitude that has more in common with TV commercials where "local" aesthetics are employed to connect to audiences and sell a product. In the case of Coke Studio, both music and product are one in the same, a part of culture turned into a prop to sell a product. The inclusion of Coke Studio's branding in the *ralli* comes off as more intrusive than inclusive, despite its good intentions.

پیاسی رہی مر جاواں گی

سوچن دی گل کیڑی؟

If I stay parched, I will die

Why are you still pondering over it?

Though the heart may be in the right place, that alone can't brush off problematic biases. When the producers say "our Sindh", who is the "our" here? Pop music in Pakistan has always been the domain of a select few who have the means and connections to get and keep their foot in the door. A production like Coke Studio is guaranteed to rake in a lot of money. The question is: how much of that money goes to the producers and the people they employ? Pakistan is a haggling economy, a dynamic made worse with a lack of formal labor protections and extreme class disparities. In the end, there's always someone who draws the short straw. It puts less well-off musicians on the back foot, leaving them at the mercy of producers and executives whose main concerns are minimizing costs and maximizing profit. This has been a problem with existing labels and distributors taking royalties and ownership away from artists and is one that Coke allegedly reinforces as well. For some musicians, it is a chance to have their voice heard both nationwide and internationally; for others, a way to scrape by and get food on the table. Exposure, limited shows and endorsements can only go so far in sustaining artists and communities. There may be representation in front of the camera and mic but behind the camera—in boardrooms and strategy meetings where important decisions happen—there's anything but.

For example, one only need look at the credits to note the producers, directors and designers in charge of the program's direction are mostly based in Lahore and Karachi. A creative environment as insulated as that—even with claims about doing research—can't help but reinforce specific biases. In the Behind-the-scenes video for *Aayi Aayi*, the director reflects "we as Coke Studio are entering their community...and they are welcoming us". Sir, you let yourself in! It flips the narrative, turning people who are actively profiting off a community's culture into guests of honor. These are people who see Pakistan through a specific lens that fixates on novelty and aesthetics without the underlying depth. While talking about the rural Sindh-inspired set for the video, he remarks "...if we literally had villages like these, we would be living there". The kind of village they yearn for? Made and filmed on a set at Karawood Film City in Karachi. The *rallis* they slapped their branding on? Provided by AmanKayRang, a fashion brand based in Lahore. There was an opportunity here to not only represent a culture but help support it by having indigenous people take charge of the production. Who else could exercise greater authority about what their villages and traditions look like? Instead, the money flows its way out of those communities and into the hands of those who stand to benefit most from them. This attitude tells us how the people at the helm of Coke Studio extract from less recognized cultures within Pakistan. They took a tradition and appropriated it, wove themselves—both figuratively and literally—into the fabric of these people's lives. They manufactured a pastiche of a rural culture, a more palatable recreation of a community with the edges sawn off. Coke Studio treats culture as a novelty to win hearts, minds and the money in people's wallets, as the people they take from remain inadequately compensated.

The consequences of such appropriation don't just hurt underrepresented communities; it hurts everyone else as well. There is so much about Pakistan's myriad communities that most people don't know about. Coke Studio is only an example of an institution that, by catering to a select few, shows only a fraction of the knowledge, customs and beauty that exist within our borders. Without connection there is no understanding and that makes way for ignorance, biases and, unfortunately, violence. Some may argue that something is better than nothing; Coke Studio has, in its own way, been a window into those underrepresented aspects of the country. However, that alone is not enough. A piece of land cannot grow without the right environment and means to nourish and sustain itself. Corporations like Coke, for all their gestures and intentions, do not meaningfully represent and give back to the cultures they appropriate from.

Image credits: indus-crafts.com, Coca-Cola Pakistan

میں دو گھڑیاں تیری پرونی

ظد لانی تے آپ منونی

تو چپ کر کہ من جا سجنا

قدر کراں گی تیری

I am your guest but for a moment

I know how to get my way

If you silently obey my demand, my beloved

I will hold you in high esteem

In 2016, YouTube was once again accessible in Pakistan after being banned in 2013. The following years since its return saw an increased adoption of social media platform. The recent regional launch of Spotify in 2022 introduced another way for musicians to share and monetize their work. Through algorithms and a bit of luck, anyone could potentially become a music sensation. Such avenues have diminished the relevance of Coke Studio somewhat, which for a long time relied on old talent and nostalgia as a major draw. Its move to a music video format and fresh talent has been an attempt to maintain its foothold. However, today's audiences are more conscious of the way corporations enable questionable practices locally and globally. A new coat of paint can't obscure the systemic rot within such institutions from the supposed values they claim to have to the public.

Can music in Pakistan continue to grow without corporate sponsorship? On one hand, some musicians feel it can work, citing how it helps support talent and big shows provided artistic integrity is not compromised in the process. On the other hand, the absence of such sponsorship would leave artists to contend with pre-existing issues involving access to infrastructure as well as questionable practices from local distributors and other international platforms like Spotify. Corporate sponsorship has become ubiquitous in Pakistan over the years, with brands like Walls, Nescafe, Bisconni, Red Bull, Velo and more all wanting a piece of the pie Coke Studio baked. What they all have in common is the promotion of their product and their disregard for the aesthetics and economy of the scene. Much like everything else in Pakistan, the system is busted for everyone except those who stand to gain the most from it.

Coke Studio has been lauded for bringing music back to Pakistan during a period marked by instability and terrorism. It is also responsible for enabling and reinforcing a limited representation of the nation's cultures through surface-level appropriation. It is darling and oppressor, an institution that panders to a select few by pulling from the fringes to turn a profit. It is a symptom of a larger systemic issue of bias and inequity persistent in Pakistan, one that's dug deep into the country's psyche. How do we root it out? It would take a complete overhaul of how we approach music and the arts, one that doesn't appropriate the diversity of its people and instead meaningfully supports them and their communities. It would require infrastructure that enables equitable access to opportunities that are protected from abuse by robust labor protections. Above all, it would take a rejection of nationalism—of a limited view of what Pakistan can and cannot be—and an embrace of pluralism. Whether or not all the above may be possible is uncertain. Nonetheless, it is an aspiration we might all pour one out to.

Syed Hamza Salar Hassan is a graphic designer and illustrator based in Lahore, Pakistan. Check out his work on Instagram and at hamzasalar.com

Spreadsheet Cities: A Conversation with Hamza Bajwa

The man behind Maula Jatt's VFX discusses his interest in urban design and environmental activism in the first part of this interview

In your body of work, you've expressed opinions about housing societies and gated communities in Pakistan. In what ways do you feel these societies have affected the social and aesthetic landscape of the country?

For starters, the real estate market is the only truly functioning sector in our economy that everybody wants to partake in. The elite engage in such investments and as a result, others also partake, starting from luxury farmhouses to 3 Marla plots. This sector relies primarily on a great deal of speculation and is not productive in any sense. Over the course of the last decade, we've seen this slow down due to external pressure and our commitments with the IMF. This is a result of our socioeconomic history which is also part of the legacy of colonial institutions inherited by the elite. There is no sense of communal public life as there are no public pedestrian spaces. The only places where you can congregate are in commercial areas and those are also limited to economic factors. If you want to sit somewhere nice, you're going to have to buy that coffee. If you want to go for a stroll in a nice climate, you're going to have to walk through the Mega Mall. Good luck finding a seat at the food court.

This urban and suburban development is a model similar to Detroit and other cities developed around big industry. This industrial boom jump started a hyper capitalist lifestyle that we now come to know as "the American dream". Today, these cities are crumbling under the weight of their misplaced ambitions. Architects and urban designers are trying to revitalize these abandoned, desolate suburbs. We have adopted that hyper-Capitalist mindset and its serving only a certain class of people.

Where do you think this particular mindset comes from in our context?

In our local context, we have a prevalent feudal mindset where land and its people are coerced and forced into giving away their land at a bargain price. Those who remain in their villages are eventually ingested into the walls of gated communities and become ghettoized. They live in slum-like conditions and serve as domestic help for the elite that inhabit housing societies. We could also talk about how the newer developments in Lahore are entirely car-centric. The acquired land is stripped bare of its natural vegetation. Roads and utilities are laid down in a grid like fashion like a never ending excel sheet. Then these roads are embellished with non native species of trees that provide little to no shade and environmental benefit. There's this saying "growth for the sake of growth is cancer". These developments are cancerous as such developments continue to consume more and more resources to sustain it.

The environmental impact of Lahore's unchecked expansion can be seen in smog during winter, which makes three to four months of the year unbearable. Our government will have you believe that it's all crop burning from India, concealing the fact that 60% of Lahore's smog is actually because of vehicular and industrial emissions. We really have to think about creating spaces where lives and culture can flourish in a healthy environment. These spaces need to challenge the existing gentrification and environmental impact that's happening in development. You can't cordon off public land and then designate one particular class to it. You need to have vibrant public places where there's room for healthy friction that leads to dialogue between all citizens.

The Lahore of today has become a scattered mess of disjointed gated communities in a sea of dispossessed people with no cultural, historical center. A healthy city requires a focal point that ties everything and everyone together. Androon Shehr and similar older parts of the city are underserved. Areas like Shahalmi are relegated to commercial activity with varying degrees of legality; it is no longer built for living. As a result, there is no stake in making it liveable and preserving its character. That said, there are some good things happening in terms of preserving heritage. The Walled City Authority has engaged institutions like the Agha Khan, restoring all kinds of the old heritage buildings, whether that's the Shahi-Hamam, the Lahore Fort or havelis in the

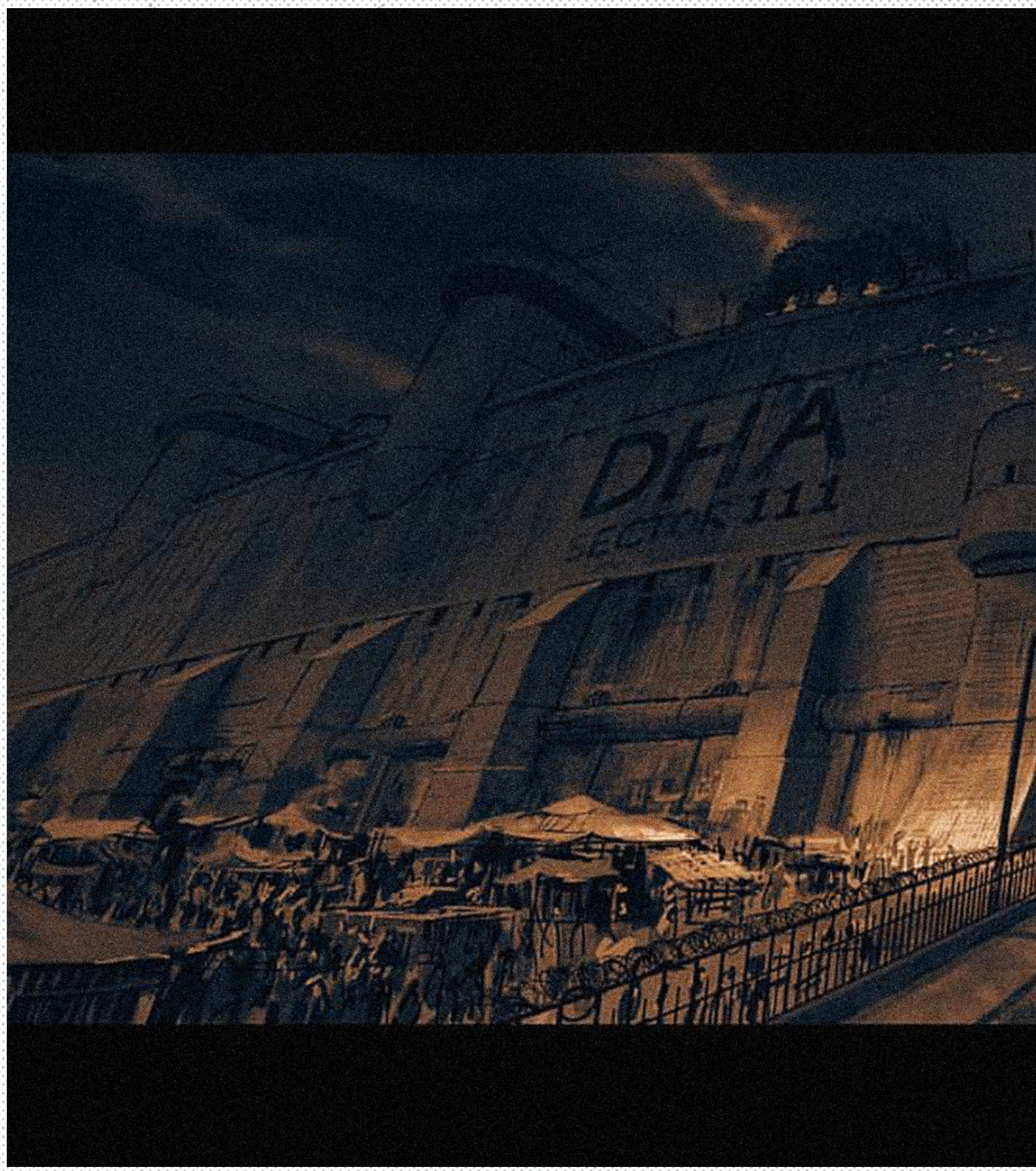
DHA
PHASE III

Image credits: Hamza Bajwa

"We have adapted [a] hyper-Capitalist mindset and it's serving only a handful of people"

Androon Lahore area. However, these are just pockets of cultural activity that are highly inaccessible. Anytime you have to go there, you have to think twice. What people usually do when they have guests from out of town is sit on the rooftop of Cuckoo's Den and get a nice picture of the Badshahi Mosque. All the layers of history that lie within the walled city go unnoticed. It's something that needs to be made accessible. It requires a lot of ownership; people have to act like stakeholders and maintain their own cultural heritage.

Islamabad has the same story. You have the CDA, which is the authority that was started by the dictator Ayub Khan. They wanted to manufacture a city and they did it with complete disregard to the local population who had a unique understanding of the area's ecosystems and indigenous practices. All of that was erased to create a presentable facade of a city run by the establishment. Now, people within the city are craving for that very same ideal of living in a place where one can breathe. Islamabad is a new city compared to Lahore. Given its nature as a Lahore has become the very opposite of that. So, I feel like Islamabad's the last bastion for hope, where things are malleable enough, where forces can be garnered, and provoked into making the right decisions. Lahore is no longer something that can be saved or transmuted into something worth living in.

I understand you have a background in environmental activism. Where do you get that from?

I come from a family of environmental activists. Both my parents are gardeners and urban farmers. Their gardening activities are not confined to their four walls; they take it upon themselves to maintain much of the greenery around the neighborhood, contributing positive change to public spaces. The city grew around us and we had to maintain They encourage others to become community stakeholders so that they can contribute to the collective good. This gives the community the benefit of confronting destructive developments like highways and housing schemes that harm environmental and social structures. It gives communities a sense of ownership. That kind of proactive action needs to be taken. Unfortunately, in places like DHA, they have such radical control over public and private spaces. These by-laws have become a means of authoritarian control. I understand the need for them in some places, but if your entire urban development plan is so flawed and inhumane, by-laws effectively become prison sentences. I would appreciate the need for bylaws if you had an intelligently designed urban environment where your workplace is an earshot away, has a pleasant commute and one can get to it without becoming roadkill.

We need green corridors that dissect the entire city and have large shaded areas with native species of trees. Instead, we have the Lahore canal which is choked on either side by 3-way highways. There's so much that one can think of in terms of connecting communities that are bifurcated to these gated societies. People are not stupid; they are able to learn things and when there's something happening that's good, they want to partake in it. We don't need an authority to come to our doorstep and tell where to plant trees.

Stay tuned for the next part of our interview with artist Hamza Bajwa, where we dive deeper into arts education, folklore and creative industry in Pakistan.

Hamza Bajwa's portfolio of work is available to view on Artstation and Instagram

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A Zine on Art and Design

Aks is an independent zine that will publish art, writing and research on Pakistani visual culture. Our goal is to create an accessible, community-based resource of perspectives regarding past, present and possible Pakistani visual culture (design, art, film, etc).

Interested in contributing written work to Aks? Email us at **justaskaks@gmail.com**